

# CHILDREN CONVICTED OF HOMICIDE

by

**K. S. WALSH-BRENNAN, M.R.C.Psych.**

Consultant in Child and Family Psychiatry, Sale, Cheshire

THERE has been an increase in crimes of violence in Britain during the past two decades (Sparrow, 1968). With this change there have also occurred variations in the pattern of homicide by both sexes and of all ages in England and Wales, particularly since the introduction of the Homicide Act in 1957 as shown in the Figure and a growth in murders committed by children as shown in the Table.

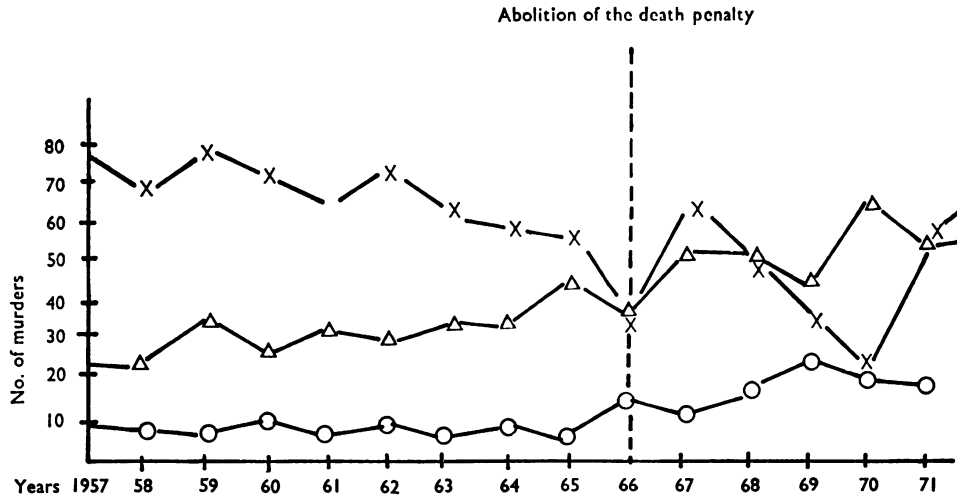


Fig. 1. Murder motives from 1957 to 1971. X, insane; Δ, sane (personal motives); O, sane (criminal motives).

Before the abolition of the death penalty for homicide the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 defined 18 years as the minimum age for execution, the last teenager to be hanged being "Flossie" Forsythe in 1960 at the age of 18. Prior to 1966 a murderer could "hang by the neck until dead" and due to this courts were more ready to allow a culprit to be termed "insane". Since then the number of "insane" murderers of both sexes and all ages has fallen from four times the figure for those classed as "normal" or "sane" to a nearly equal number as shown in the Figure. Due to this people are now going to prison who would formerly have gone to Broadmoor or Rampton, an unforeseen development of community psychiatry (Walsh-Brennan, 1973).

Regarding factors associated with the development of child killers it has been stated (Home Office, 1968) that "there are many influences on the behaviour of children and that of the family is particularly important." In his Sing-Sing Prison

THE TABLE

*Boys found guilty of murder in England and Wales between 1957 and 1972 who were younger than 18 at the time when the offence was recorded as known to the Police. One girl was involved in 1971*

Year	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72
Number	1	1	1	4	1	2	1	1	1	3	5	4	9	8	8	8

Survey Gleuck (1954) related psychopathic behaviour to home background. So also did Johnston (1955) at the Mayo Clinic, and as a result of 10 years of study of parent and child there she concluded that children who are aggressive, homicidal, set fires or exhibit sexual deviations "are usually doing what their parents sub-consciously wish". She believed that "the child's defective conscious is traceable to a like defect in the parents' own poor resolution of unconscious impulses to similar anti-social behaviour".

Burt (1944) associated childhood violence with the parents and he concluded "to lose respect for one's parents is to lose respect for oneself, for one's fellows, and for the whole basis of morality". It is noteworthy that poverty was not considered a cause by Burt, in which sense he quotes Seneca (Epist. XVI) "Si ad naturam vivas, numquam eris pauper; si ad desiderium, numquam dives" (If you live in accordance with Nature, you will never be poor; if you live in accordance with your desires, you will never be rich). Spock (1969) considered that "A child acquires his basic standards from his parents. If they are decent people and love him, he loves them deeply too, and patterns himself after them".

It was thus decided to investigate a group of 11 child and adolescent murderers, one girl and ten boys, under the following three aspects: —

1. Family and social history.
2. Adverse factors in family background.
3. Previous criminal records, psychological, psychiatric aspects and treatment.

The age of the group ranged from 10 to 15½ years when the offence was recorded.

#### FAMILY AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Two boys were in Social Class III. The girl's parents fulfilled the criteria of Social Class IV as did five of the males. Three were in Class V while doubt existed as to the remaining two boys. In contrast to the observation by Burt (1944), who noted a high proportion of only children in this context, none of the children belonged to this category. Five were the eldest in their families, one of the youngest and the remainder in intermediate grades. The five eldest could be associated with the Gleucks' survey (Gleuck & Gleuck, 1950) who reported a deficiency of only and youngest children in their group. While there was only one female in the group it was noteworthy she was the eldest in keeping with the work of Ming Tse-Tsuang (1966) who found eldest girls more aggressive and emotionally more unstable than their siblings. None of the eleven was adopted and all were legitimate.

Personal relationships between the girl and her mother were normal. In eight of the ten boys the maternal role was aggressive and overdominant as illustrated in the following case histories: —

#### *Case 1*

This boy was convicted at the age of 12½, of murdering a subnormal girl, aged 11. He was the product of an intact home background with no marked material deprivation. The home background was disturbed, however, in that the father was a weak passive figure who left not only the running of the house but other responsibilities to his wife. The female parent gradually assumed a dominant and aggressive role to the extent of bringing into the house at different periods two male companions with whom she had sexual relations.

#### *Case 2*

Norman was aged 11½ when he drowned a boy. His father, a postman, spent little time at home and left familial discipline to his "14 stone wife who came from the Isle of Man." Norman's mother was a demanding, attention-seeking and "mannish type" woman who ruled Norman and the rest of the family rigidly. In the family Norman had an intermediate position.

### ADVERSE FACTORS IN FAMILY BACKGROUND

Parental promiscuity existed in at least three cases. Alcoholism was not found in any one of the parental groups; but as alcoholics lack insight, and are unreliable, information may not have been disclosed to the investigating social workers.

The father of the girl was the only parent with a criminal conviction although this was suspected in three other cases. Only one family had a member with chronic physical illness, a spastic child causing inter-personal stress: the remainder were physically fit. There was also no record of parental neuroses nor psychoses. The girl came from a slum area in Newcastle-on-Tyne, five boys came from congested industrial regions, one lived in a National Park in North Wales, the rest in rural or suburban areas.

Poniatowski (1973) in an address to a Conference of European Ministers of Health at the Council of Europe proposed payment of a "social wage" to mothers with children at risk with anti-social traits. Investigations were, therefore, carried out into the proportion of working mothers. Five of the female parents went out to earn money, but for varying periods of time alternating with illness and redundancy. In view of statistical difficulties in establishing criteria, and the observation by Stolz (1960) that "one can say almost anything one desired about children of employed mothers and support the statement by some research study," this research has been left for a later occasion. Difficulty was experienced in attempting to establish criteria to assess "The Cycle of Deprivation Theory" put forward by Joseph (1972). While there were indications in the girl and four of the boys of possible applicability of the Cycle of Deprivation, the eight overdominant maternal relationships appeared more noteworthy.

"The Cycle of Deprivation" means the way in which those parents of all social classes who have been themselves emotionally, intellectually or culturally deprived and therefore "hurt" in their own youth, tend to "hurt" their own child in exactly the same way. This is by repeating the actions and attitudes which initially damaged

them as children, or by exaggerating those same actions. The estimated amount of children affected is between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of the total child population. To date, the role of a Cycle of Deprivation has not been the subject of wide research, although the fraction of the national child population suffering should be easily identified.

#### PREVIOUS CRIMINAL RECORDS, PSYCHOLOGICAL, PSYCHIATRIC, AND NEUROLOGICAL ASPECTS

The girl had no criminal record. Three of the boys had, but it was merely of a minor nature. (Here it is perhaps noteworthy that occupational therapy staff found the homicidal children more co-operative generally than other boys and girls with non-capital offences).

The psychological tests of Burt, Weschler and Cattell were applied to each of the eleven children. Normal intellect was found in all 33 examinations with no indications of mental handicap.

All the subjects were physically fit and although "blackouts" had been reported in several cases, nothing abnormal was found on routine examination including Wassermann test, X-ray skull and E.E.G. Three of the boys had anxiety reactions but no other neuroses or psychoses. Child Psychiatry Aids (Walsh-Brennan, 1973) were not required for incontinence. Contrary to expectation none showed attention seeking or demanding behaviour. This facilitated rehabilitation as shown by Gosney and Walsh-Brennan (1969).

#### TREATMENT

Treatment varied considerably. One boy aged 11 examined by the author in October, 1973, had killed a man of 47 by fracturing his skull with a brick, but was sent home for Christmas. The girl at one time spent a short period in a paediatric ward after conviction. Four received Borstal sentences and the rest transferred to community homes: their further behaviour showed no abnormalities.

#### DISCUSSION

Various reasons are advanced for the increase in the number of child killers. TV violence for example was considered by Belson (1973) who did fieldwork on 1,565 London boys in the 12-17 year old age group. The increase coincides with the 1968 peak of childrens' drug abuse recorded by Boyd (1972). It may be related to the concept of "Social Deprivation" put forward by Eisenberg (1973) which tends to conform with the animal behaviour research of Tinbergen i.e. "deprivation of parental, perhaps primarily maternal love" (1973). A theory that better detection of battered babies leads to more who live and who themselves later batter and kill has been put forward by Andrew (1974) to explain the growth. In addition there is "The Permissive Society" described by Whiteley and Whiteley (1964).

In the group studied the figure of eight overdominant mothers appears noteworthy. Adoption agencies may take encouragement from the fact that none were adopted and all were legitimate.

In view of the relatively large number of abnormal maternal relationships, further research is indicated on two aspects—(a) Role of the working mother as

defined by Stolz with particular reference to maternal dominance and (b) "The Cycle of Deprivation" theory put forward by Joseph.

#### SUMMARY

An analysis of 11 children convicted of homicide, one girl and ten boys, indicates a maternal over-dominant relationship in eight of the males studied.

The murderers were found to have more co-operative personalities than other children found guilty of non-capital offences and showed both normal intelligence and personality factors. Despite a history of 'blackouts' in several cases, all were found on investigation to be free from epilepsy and all were healthy.

Difficulty was experienced in determining the presence or absence of parental alcoholism, promiscuity and criminal convictions. All of the 10 boys and the girl came from relatively normal homes and apart from minor offences none were involved previously in serious anti-social behaviour.

Future research is indicated on two aspects: (a) Role of the working mother with particular reference to maternal dominance, and (b) The 'Cycle of Deprivation Theory'.

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